# Review: Rita Kesselring, Bodies of Truth: Law, Memory and Emancipation in Post-Apartheid South Africa (2016)

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Rita Kesselring (2016*), Bodies of Truth: Law, Memory and Emancipation in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, ISBN 9780804798488 (cloth), 256 pp.

Living life as a former victim of Apartheid injuries is a daily challenge, even more than 20 years after South Africa's political transition. Rita Kesselring, who between 2009 and 2013 documented the lives of Apartheid victims in the townships of Cape Town, draws our attention to the bodily dimension of victimhood. Past injuries are not only inscribed in the victims' bodies but have also not lost their force over time and continue to haunt the victims in every aspect of their daily lives. While the victims are continuously confronted with the past on a physical level, the post-Apartheid state and society, like many other post-conflict societies, have moved onto another chapter and are preoccupied with building a new future.

The crux of the matter is that of all countries, South Africa, which is often cited as a role model, has failed to create a dominant discourse that victims can identify with. Instead, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and consequent government decisions have led to a rigid corset where victims are required to be "'good victims' in the eyes of society" (119), which encompasses being prepared to talk about their painful experiences, being ready to reconcile, and being ready or at least willing to integrate into society. Such expectations and social roles cannot be fulfilled by the majority of the thousands of victims, most of whom "have not made it" (119) in the new South Africa but rather continue to live in precarious socio-economic conditions. They were not part of the 21,000 cases the TRC heard during its mandate and which concentrated on extreme cases of gross human rights violations (chapter 1). They were, however, among the many more who suffered from routinised forms of violence, oppression, and marginalisation, for which it is more difficult to seek redress (chapter 2).

Kesselring is a social anthropologist and her dense and vivid ethnographic exploration relays the victims' lifeworlds, perspectives, and preoccupations. She underlines the importance of the litigations initiated by victims' organisations, particularly after the closure of the TRC in 2003. Court hearings have the capacity to grant victims the social recognition they need to transform their victimhood. The findings from her critical assessment of legal proceedings and her intensive accompaniment of the prominent Khulumani victims' support group provide evidence that in the South African case the law plays the role of a broker of collective political action (chapter 4). However, she does not overlook the reality that victims

need to gain new bodily and social experiences through new practices or public performance of their victimhood to enable them to articulate their concerns politically. How the political is interwoven with the social becomes clear in her chapter 5, "Emancipation from Victimhood".

The author leads us directly into victims' living quarters and backyards. As a researcher she gathers information from beyond the predicated discursive realm, which makes her account multidimensional and real. She shows how outside the courts, in silent spaces, victims can gather new social and bodily experiences through shared backgrounds and inter-subjective knowledge of "the other." Lived socialities and (tacit) practices beyond the discursive realm (e.g. spending time together to comfort each other) have led to experiences of mutual support and solidarity. Nevertheless, the victims, particularly those in lower socio-economic groups, might still be immersed in intimate personal experiences and unable to detach themselves from their bodily experiences, rendering communication about their experiences to others who do not share their background impossible, particularly in the public realm.

With her insightful vignettes portraying victims and their ways of "being-in-the-world" (185) in different constellations, Kesselring demonstrates that there are many pathways for dealing with injured personhood far from the public realm. Some people are able to transform and become emancipated, shifting to "a self that is not primarily dominated by victimhood" (141). The author devotes particular attention to different practices that might facilitate such transformation and result in a new social status and the taking on of a new social role besides victimhood. However, the political stance that victim organisations like Khulumani are taking is equally important because they are advocating a change in the dominant victim discourses. Victims relate to these discourses ("victim subject positions" as Kesselring calls them, 13) and are shaped by them. Therefore, a discourse that better reflects the bodily dimension of victimhood is crucial to victims feeling recognised by society.

*Bodies of Truth* manages to capture that which is not spoken of but can be perceived through bodily presence. It excellently blends detailed empirical data gathered during Kesselring's multiple stays in South Africa (19 months in total) with very profound and broad knowledge of theories of the social, the law, and the body. The author's astute and subtle reflections, her direct uncovering of weak deductions on the part of others, and her confident suggestions such as "I suggest turning Foucault on his head" (201) make the book a fascinating read. At the same time, the author leads the reader elegantly and step by step through complex considerations

with a clear and precise style which makes the book worthwhile reading for those without previous knowledge of the topic.

The author presents an heuristic typology from non-predicated to articulated victimhood by introducing the terms victimhood, victim subjectivity, and victim subject positions (12–13). Her decision proves to be a valid but sometimes insufficient frame for distinguishing between different expressions and states of embodied memory. The vivid vignettes of her informants give the reader an idea of the manifold presentations and dimensions of embodied memory. However, from time to time readers are left alone regarding how to gauge the effect of victims moving in the interstices of the typology between victimhood and victim subjectivity and articulating their experiences of harm with others but not in the public realm. With regard to terminology one would have wished for more elaboration of the terms "emancipation" and "transformation" – for instance, their definition and distinctiveness relative to their use in other disciplines, and their close association with other terms such as "empowerment." Other terms – such as "bodily sedimented experiences" – lack clarity, mostly due to the precocious state of embodiment studies. Though our knowledge on how and where exactly the information we absorb – for example, through social interactions – is stored in the body is still limited, research undertaken in different disciplines has made some progress in the past years and could have been added to give the reader a more precise picture.

One of the many merits of the book is that Kesselring strictly adheres to her perspective as a social scientist. Without medicalising, pathologising, or psychologising the victims – trends in anthropology that she rejects – her profound empirical data arrives at conclusions that in some important respects confirm what we know from disciplines that focus merely on the individual: the importance of social contact, of solidarity, and of bonding (as a result of intense sharing) as prerequisites for personal transformation. The author, however, bridges the gap and gives us a broader understanding of how the individual and the social are intertwined and how distancing oneself from embodied memory can be a prerequisite for personal, social, or political action.

Contrary to many others who include the perspective of embodiment in their research, Kesselring adopts a phenomenological approach toward embodied experiences of harm and does not become immersed in a mere description of the multiple ways in which the bodies of her informants still bear the visible and invisible traces of violence. Nor does she engage in the popular debate about trauma. In fact, she hints at one of the all too common pitfalls of researchers who claim to have distanced themselves from

the mind-body dualism: in the field they easily take on the mind perspective while they "read" the body of their informants.

The reflections and observations of Kesselring – whose initial research focus was not the body, as she reveals – are relevant not only for those who are interested in body studies but also for qualitative field research in general. Kesselring elaborates on the qualitative gains researchers could make through the awareness that they themselves have the potential to acquire bodily and sensory knowledge in the field, which in turn makes it possible to obtain more knowledge about the embodied being of their informants.

Kesselring's discoveries demonstrate that a deeper understanding of the individual in their bodily dimension can provide us with important findings relevant for further research, particularly in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, and history. In particular, her core statement that "the body is both the condition for and the limit to the formation of a social or political collective" should encourage other researchers to investigate the relationship between political agency and embodied experiences.

*Bodies of Truth* has the potential to become a milestone and contribute to a more intense interdisciplinary exchange between researchers who take seriously the embodied perspective outlined by Kesselring, transforming this exchange into a debate on the conditions for social change and its relationship to embodied memory – a debate which critically examines the contributions and limitations generated by the inclusion of "the bodily dimension of being" (204) when looking at the Social and the Political. This would probably facilitate a more aligned (though not necessarily common) terminology between disciplines. Although much progress has been made in the field of body research in recent years, our knowledge about the conditions under which a person can distance themselves from their embodied memories is, as Kesselring rightly outlines, still limited. *Bodies of Truth* equips us with a much deeper and profound insight into these processes.

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